The Sixty-second Season of
The William Nelson Cromwell and F. Lammot Belin

Concerts

National Gallery of Art

Sixty-first American Music Festival

23 May 2004
Sunday Evenings, 7:00 pm
West Building, West Garden Court

Admission free

The sixty-first American Music Festival
is made possible in part by a generous gift from
the Ann and Gordon Getty Foundation.

The use of cameras or recording equipment during the performance is not allowed. Please be sure that cell phones, pagers, and other electronic devices are turned off.

For the convenience of concertgoers
the Garden Café remains open until 6:30 pm.

The Musician

JOSEPH SMITH

The *New York Times* called pianist Joseph Smith's playing "eloquent," and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* found him a "richly sensitive interpreter." Through performances, recordings, broadcasts, lectures, and magazine articles, Smith has enjoyed bringing many little-known pieces to the attention of the public, especially from the American repertoire. His recordings of the piano music of Griffes for Musical Heritage Society also drew high praise: "a persuasive, thoughtful interpreter" (*American Record Guide*), "He projects these pieces with complete mastery" (*High Performance Review*), and "he displayed consummate understanding and sensitivity" (*Stereophile*). Smith's most recent CD is *Familiar Melodies* (Brioso 126). Brioso will also be releasing a new CD of waltzes from Beethoven to Poulenc, including the Strayhorn *Valse*.

Smith's feature, "Joseph Smith's Piano Bench," ran monthly on National Public Radio's "Performance Today" for two years. His column, "Rare Finds," has appeared in *Piano Today* magazine since 1993, and he has written for the British magazine *Piano*. Smith is editor of *Four Early Twentieth-Century Piano Suites by Black Composers* (G. Schirmer), which brought Burleigh's *From the Southland* back into print after decades of neglect, as well as *American Piano Classics* (Dover Publications), which includes a wide variety of music from the Civil War era through the early 1920s. He is the author of *Piano Discoveries* (Ekay Music) and has edited volumes of Latin American dances and works by Percy Grainger. He is working on a volume of romantic music for the Steinway series of publications and a volume of piano waltzes for Dover.

Program Notes

Concertgoers are invited to enjoy both this American Music Festival concert and an exhibition that offers a parallel encounter with nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American creativity: *American Masters from Bingham to Eakins: The John Wilmerding Collection*. Showcasing one of the most important private collections of nineteenth-century American art, the exhibition consists of fifty-one paintings by twenty-six American artists. Works by such masters as George Caleb Bingham, Frederic Edwin Church, Thomas Eakins, Alvan Fisher, William Stanley Haseltine, Martin Johnson Heade, Fitz Hugh Lane, John Marin, John F. Peto, and William Trost Richards represent four decades of collecting in an area of particular scholarly interest to John Wilmerding, former deputy director at the National Gallery and currently Christopher B. Sarofim '86 Professor for American Art at Princeton University. The exhibition includes landscapes, marine painting, portraits, genre scenes, still lifes, and figure paintings. The life spans of the artists (George Caleb Bingham was born in 1811 and Andrew Wyeth, who is still living, in 1917) roughly coincide with those of the American composers represented on this program (MacDowell was born in 1860 and Copland died in 1990). These composers made many of the same aesthetic choices as the artists of the time: they gradually emerged from the domination of their European master teachers; they experimented with sounds previously unimagined; they challenged inherited forms; and they searched for specifically American symbols. Both the composers and the artists of the period were deeply affected by symbolist poetry and by the theory of correspondences, as espoused by Charles Beaudelaire (1821–1867). According to this theory, many aspects of music and the visual arts are closely linked. Charles Griffes was not only a gifted composer but also a talented artist who produced delicate watercolors, etchings, and drawings. One of Edward MacDowell's legacies to American culture was

the establishment of the MacDowell Colony at his home in Peterborough, New Hampshire; it has served as a meeting place for musicians, writers, and artists since 1907.

MacDowell provided a poetic epigraph for his *"Norse" Sonata* (1899):

> Night had fallen on a day of deeds.
> The great rafters in the red-ribbed hall
> Flashed crimson in the fitful flame
> Of smoldering logs.
> And from the stealthy shadows
> That crept 'round Harald's throne,
> Rang out a Skald's strong voice,
> With tales of battles won; of Gudrun's love
> And Sigurd, Siegmund's son.

The sonata does not relate a specific tale but is infused with the idea of epic storytelling. Accordingly, every movement ranges from *pianissimo* to *fortissimo*. The work might better be described as a "symphony for piano" rather than as a sonata. The idea of narrative is reflected not only in its content, but also in its form. Opening with a dark, brooding passage, the sonata gradually increases in tempo to burst into an exultant theme. One has the impression of a slow introduction, followed by the beginning of a sonata form. The recapitulation makes clear, however, that the "introduction" is actually the first thematic group and the exultant theme the beginning of the second. Melodic motifs reappear in all movements. Yet, since the motifs are disguised by variation, the sonata does not seem cyclical in form but instead bound together by a characteristic melodic language. Themes with strong trochaic stresses energize the rhythm of all three movements.

MacDowell was readily embraced in his own time as "America's first great composer." Later generations rebelled at this easy acceptance, and his musical identity as "American" was questioned, or even simply denied, by

several generations of musicologists. Indeed, the first edition of the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* asserted flatly: "It is hard to find anything distinctively American about [MacDowell's] music." But MacDowell himself wrote: "What we [American composers] must arrive at is the youthful optimistic vitality and the undaunted tenacity of spirit that characterizes the American man. This is what I hope to see echoed in American music." Thus, despite its Norse associations, the third sonata is also American by virtue of its heroic aspiration and excess of virile energy.

The catalogue of Harold Arlen's works testifies not only to the incredible number of memorable songs he composed, but also to their variety and adventurousness. A great innovator in popular song—he could ignore the conventional thirty-two-bar pattern and still write a hit—Arlen never tackled the large instrumental forms. The two piano pieces on this program date from 1960, late in his career. They are modest, but instrumentally conceived and characteristic. *Bon-Bon* contrasts two themes: the first is sharp-edged and cocky, the second extended in indolent *legato* phrases full of large downward leaps to far-fetched tones. The *Ode* exemplifies Arlen's predilection for free, flexible lines that resemble jazz improvisation.

The African American composer and singer Harry T. Burleigh is best remembered for his celebrated arrangements of spirituals for voice and piano, which made it possible to include this glorious body of folksongs in conventional recitals. However, even before the first of his solo spirituals appeared in 1917, Burleigh had established himself as one of the leading American art-song composers of his day. He produced only a single work for piano, the suite *From the Southland*. Its sixth movement, *A New Hiding-Place,* is based on two spirituals: the famous *My Lord, What a Morning,* and the virtually forgotten *A New Hiding-Place* (although it is quoted by W. E. B. du Bois as an epigraph to a chapter of his classic book, *The Souls of Black Folk*).

The very first notes of Copland's *Piano Variations* proclaim its compositional premise. The theme is in single notes, punctuated by heavy chords. The pauses between the phrases contribute to the starkness of the theme. The absence of harmony and rhythmic pulse implies that the intervals are the constant to be varied. The repetitions of shape within the theme and its constant return to the note C-sharp lend an insistent character. Other sets of variations may vary in the general shape of the theme, the harmonies, or the bass line, but Copland focuses on melodic intervals and the chords that accompany them. Not only all the melodic lines but also the most fleeting and colorful passages are formed from these intervals, giving the work its obsessive power. The high degree of dissonance and the strictness of form in this work have led some Copland scholars to consider it atypical. However, in other respects, such as in his use of jazz-inspired rhythms, strong tonal center, characteristic wide spacing of chords, grandeur, tenderness, and humor, it is as characteristic of the composer as his most popular works.

The energy of Scott Joplin's rags is tempered by Copland's melodic warmth. Conversely, the affectionate sentiment of *Bethena: A Concert Waltz* is enlivened by lilting, raggy syncopation. Its five strains are resourcefully differentiated in mood and phrase structure, as well as by curious contrasts of tonality. The conflation of the two most characteristic American turn-of-the-century genres, sentimental waltz and ragtime, doubles the nostalgic poignancy of *Bethena*.

The jazz composer Billy Strayhorn was particularly associated with pensive, elegiac moods, as they appear in works such as *Passion Flower, Chelsea Bridge,* and *Blood Count*. His *Valse,* composed around 1933 when he was still in high school and had not yet discovered his bent for jazz, shows how early the characteristic Stravian melancholy asserted itself.

Nothing that Charles Griffes wrote before his *Sonata* (1918) would suggest that he aspired to large musical forms, let alone that his only piano sonata would prove to be a masterpiece. In scope, content, and form, the sonata is unlike anything else by Griffes. He employs, both melodically

and harmonically, a synthetic mode—a scale containing two augmented seconds, as well as half and whole steps. Here, due to the scale's disjunctive intervals, the dense piano textures that enriched his previous writing become harsh and threatening. The first of the three continuous movements (*Feroce; allegretto con moto*) is introduced by a series of enraged roars. The gnarled, asymmetrical first theme mixes small intervals and large tortured leaps. The second theme is smooth and pensive, but its occasional foreshortened bars (10/8 instead of 12/8) give it an anxious undertone. Throughout the movement the texture is richly contrapuntal. Rather than a simple hierarchy of melody and accompaniment, we find a number of simultaneous voices alternating in prominence. Often, these voices seem bent on anarchic independence, impulsively veering off in different directions and conflicting with one another rhythmically. The movement's wild, rhapsodic character notwithstanding, it fulfills the requirements of an utterly traditional sonata-allegro form.

The austere theme of the slow movement (*Molto tranquillo*), barely harmonized at all, has an archaic cast. An agitated interlude leads to a new ethereal theme, heard over a faintly undulating broken fifth. The movement's close hurls us into the finale (*Allegro vivace*) with a series of screaming chords. The first theme of the finale epitomizes Griffes' use of old forms toward new ends. Here, *fugato* is not employed as an allusion to baroque tradition. Rather, the voices seem to pursue and harry one another in a violent frenzy. The other themes contrast with one another in meter as well as in character. In its cataclysmic final pages, so many accents and implied meters are combined that, despite the heavy chordal textures, the sonata seems to exult fiercely in its strength, having liberated itself from the confines of meter altogether.

Ethelbert Nevin was one of those rare composers who enjoyed immense popular success during his lifetime. His songs *The Rosary* and *Mighty Lak' a Rose* and his insidiously catchy piano piece *Narcissus* were familiar to a vast American audience in the last decade of the nineteenth and the first decade of the twentieth centuries. Nevin described his sweet, unpretentious music with endearing modesty and accuracy: "While I am doing nothing great, I am doing the best I can, and I'm going to leave a stream of sunshine, if it is possible." In 1899 Nevin composed a piano piece entitled *At Home* and published it as the last movement of a suite, *En passant, Op. 30.* Most of his piano pieces depict picturesque subjects from foreign lands, but this one finds the picturesque in a domestic setting: a June night in Washington, D.C. Nevin's piece consists of a lilting 6/8 *siciliana* that is interrupted by an interlude in African American style. The interlude begins with a section of strumming marked "like a banjo," followed by a passage, marked *Song,* that features trochaic syncopation. The song quoted, *My Love's Waitin',* is one of Nevin's own tunes. The interlude continues with a section simply marked "Quartet" in the range of male voices. Recent research has confirmed what Nevin may have meant to imply in this music, namely that barbershop singing is African American in origin. The interlude continues with a nostalgic outburst followed by the return of the opening material.

Program notes by Joseph Smith, adapted and edited by Stephen Ackert